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ABSTRACT

This paper is structured in the form of a dialog between its two authors. It chronicles the life of Eric Hoffer, a self-taught philosopher and San Francisco longshoreman. Hoffer wrote "The True Believer" (1951), eight other books, and many articles. The paper describes his working life and the influences that led him to write on such themes as: (1) "Change"; (2) "Mass Movements"; (3) "Role of the Weak in History"; (4) "Role of the Young in History"; (5) "Creativity"; (6) "Intellectuals"; (7) "Role of Jews in History"; and other themes. The paper contains an extensive bibliography of over 100 works by and about Eric Hoffer, including book reviews, television appearances made by Hoffer, and obituaries. (EH)

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Abstract of
Eric Hoffer (1902-33) revisited: books and Ideas (A
Dialogue)

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Eric Hoffer (1902-33), self taught philosopher and San Francisco longshoreman, who write The True Believer, 1951, and some 3 other books and many articles. Describes his working life and influences which led him to write on such themes as: change, mass movements, the role of the weak in history, role of young in history, creativity, intellectuals, role of Jews in history, and other themes. Contains extensive bibliography of works by and about Eric Hoffer, including television appearances.

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BETTY: Why Hoffer? Why take our time with him? What is the attraction?

FRANK: Hoffer was rare: a laboring man and self-taught philosopher; a Los Angeles skid row tramp who thought and wrote books; a California migrant fruit picker who wrote aphorisms, pithy sayings, with insights into events and trends of our time; a San Francisco longshoreman who wrote The True Believer, bestselling analysis of mass movements; a bold man on President Lyndon Johnson's National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, who told Blacks: stop crying about prejudice and pull yourselves and your people out of the ghetto, out of the gutter; a passionate man who electrified viewers when interviewed by James Day on San Francisco's education TV station KQED and by Eric Sevareid on CBS national TV. Phone calls praising him lit up CBS affiliate switchboards all over the country. Hoffer was rare indeed.

BETTY: His heyday was the 50s and 60s. Sure, his first book clarified the motives and hatreds of Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin, and their true believer followers. But in 1968-69, by criticizing Blacks and by praising President Lyndon Johnson, he lost his liberal following, was no longer everyone's guru. Still, a decade later and 7 years after his death, reappraising his books and ideas might be worthwhile. Who was Eric Hoffer?

FRANK: He was born in the Bronx, New York City, July 26, 1902, the only child of Knut and Elsa Hoffer, Alsatian Germans. His mother, a small woman, carried him often, a big baby, in her arms until he was 5 (1907) when, holding him, she fell down a flight of stairs, leaving

him with a permanent cleft in his forehead. Two years later she died. Perhaps from the shock, Eric temporarily lost his eyesight and memory from ages 7 to 15 (1909-17). He never went to school, learned no trade, and was constantly cared for by Martha Bauer, a Bavarian peasant who came over on the boat with his parents and lived with them. This surrogate mother was big, warm, and loving. Her care, fondling, cooking, and telling him of the clever things he did and said made his 8 years of blindness and memory loss a happy time. His father, with whom he spoke little, he later speculated, was the village intellectual and atheist, as well as a carpenter and cabinetmaker, who would say about his small library of books, "There's money in the cupboard."

BETTY: When Eric occasionally cried, his father put him on a table near the cupboard where Eric arranged and rearranged the books by size, thickness, weight, and binding color, an experience he thought later somehow helped him to classify and organize notes and ideas. Before his blindness, he somehow learned to read English and German by age 5, probably with his mother's help. At age 15 (1917) his eyesight and memory returned. Fearing a return of blindness, he read feverishly, mainly in a nearby secondhand bookstore which had just acquired a large library from an estate auction. Dostoevsky's The Idiot, which caught his eye, he read and later reread because he remembered his father saying of him during his blindness and memory loss, "What can you do with an idiot child?"

FRANK: Martha Bauer returned to Germany in 1919 when Hoffer was 17. His father died in 1920. That year, with \$300 left by his father, he bought a train ticket to Los Angeles, California. He landed on skid row and for the next 10 years (1920-30) washed dishes and did odd jobs. "You might say," he wrote, "I went straight from the nursery to the gutter."¹

In the depression (1930-41), along with the Okies and Arkies, he followed the crops as a migrant farmworker; panned for gold around Nevada City near Lake Tahoe, was a stonemason and odd job man,

always living near small town libraries. About to pan gold in the mountains in late 1936 and anticipating that he might be snowbound, he went to Lieberman's secondhand bookstore, San Francisco, and paid a dollar for the first thick book he saw with small print and without pictures. It turned out to be The Essays of Michel de Montaigne, the John Florio translation (17th century scholar), which reads like Francis Bacon's essays and the King James version of the Bible. It has, Hoffer said, "sentences with hooks in them." He did get snowbound and wrote, "I read the book through three times. How I loved Montaigne's language. I could taste the way he shaped each sentence, and for the first time in my life it occurred to me that maybe I could write things like that."² Asked later to explain his luck in finding Montaigne and his hit-or-miss stumbling on writers who influenced his thinking, Hoffer replied by quoting Louis Pasteur's remark, "Chance favors the prepared mind."

BETTY: Hoffer quoted Montaigne to fellow croppickers up and down the San Joaquin Valley. When problems or arguments arose, they asked him, "What does Montaigne say about that?" In the early 1930s, resting in a federal camp near El Centro with some 200 other jobless migrant workers, he noticed that over half of the men were maimed or crippled, physically or mentally. For the first time he realized that he belonged to a group of misfits, undesirables, who had taken the path of least resistance, the open road. Yet he and they had intelligence, tolerance, good will, and little viciousness. Why had they not made more of their lives? Crossing a barren desert on foot a few weeks later, the answer came to him. Only a pioneering task, like making the desert bloom, could fire their minds and set them to do the impossible. Tramps as pioneers? Misfits, transformed, in the Islamic term, into true believers? It seemed absurd. The more he thought about it, the more he was convinced. Many pioneers, he speculated, like the men in the camp, could not hold steady jobs; were drunkards, gamblers, fugitives, and outcasts. "If in the end they shouldered enormous tasks, endured unspeakable hardships, and accomplished the impossible, it was because they had

to.... Once they tasted the joy of achievement, they craved for more," he later wrote. Hoffer had found an idea, a working hypothesis.³

FRANK: The media, then full of posturing by Hitler and Mussolini, led Hoffer to see hundreds, thousands, then millions who formed and backed the Nazis, fascists, and communists as misfits and undesirables, joining mass movements to shed their blemished, spoiled, and fouled selves. This insight was the origin of Hoffer's first book, The True Believer, 1951.

BETTY: How did he get it published? In late 1938 he read an issue of Common Ground, a magazine trying to interpret America to the foreign-born and vice versa. Excited about the magazine's point of view, he sent his thoughts about tramps as pioneers in a letter to the editor (Louis Adamic). Associate Editor Margaret Anderson replied. She could not publish his letter, but liked it and had sent it to Eugene Saxon at Harper & Brothers. Saxon suggested that Hoffer write his autobiography. Hoffer declined. After Pearl Harbor, Hoffer volunteered for the army, was rejected because of a hernia, and took the hardest job he could find to help the war effort, as a San Francisco longshoreman (1942-67). Thinking while he worked, mainly nights, and jotting down his thoughts during work breaks, days off, and weekends, Hoffer honed and polished The True Believer, mainly during month-long dock strikes in 1946 and 1948. In 1948 he sent his handwritten manuscript to Margaret Anderson with \$100 to cover typing. After it was returned and revised, he had a candy store owner wrap the manuscript to mail to Harper. The True Believer, 1951, is dedicated to "Margaret Anderson, without whose goading finger which reached me across a continent, this book would not have been written."

Just before the 1951 publication of The True Believer, he was befriended by Selden Osborne, a master's degree graduate in political science from Stanford University, where he had roomed for awhile with Clark Kerr, future president of the University of California. Selden, a longshoreman, yearned for leadership in the longshoreman's

union. Sunday dinner at the Osbornes was followed by a lasting friendship with Mrs. Lili Osborne and her children, Hoffer's only near permanent family attachment.

FRANK: The True Believer asks what kind of people a mass movement appeals to and why? It appeals to those wanting change because they are dissatisfied with themselves. Blaming their condition on forces outside themselves, they think that to change the world around them will cure their own problems. A mass movement thus offers people a new identity, teaches its followers to hate the present, to be ready to die if necessary for a new, unspoiled, beautiful, perfect tomorrow. Mass movements are thus essentially interchangeable. But America was never captured by mass movements such as Nazism, fascism, and communism. In uprooting themselves from Europe to America, from the old to a new country, immigrants changed themselves: new language, new clothes, new name, and new identity.

BETTY: Hoffer then asked: who are the potential converts to a mass movement? They are the misfits, people searching for a cause to give meaning to their lives. They are the newly poor who remember better days, the newly free who lack a close-knit family or community, temporary misfits such as adolescents or the unemployed, permanent misfits with lasting mental and physical defects, or the estranged with unfulfilled dreams of creativity. Included are the inordinately selfish, ambitious, bored, and sinners burdened by deep guilt.

FRANK: Hoffer saw three kinds of people who start, lead, and consolidate mass movements: first, men of words (whom he later called intellectuals) who start a mass movement. Second are men of action who lead the revolutionary phase of the movement and are usually uncreative, frustrated, self-righteous, petty and rude. Third are practical men of affairs who take over and, if the movement survives, make leading the movement their careers.⁴

BETTY: Hoffer's second book, The Passionate State Of Mind, 1955, from his 1930s and '40s notebooks, continued to describe the true believer as one who shakes the world. A passionate mind comes from dissatisfaction with one's self. It is usually uncreative and uses its energy only to convulse the world. The weak, Hoffer said, often conquer the strong because their very insecurity drives them to unite and to turn their weakness into strength. In times of great change, the weak become pioneers. Hoffer found hope in people's capacity for compassion, pity, and helpfulness.⁵

FRANK: While struggling to write his third book on intellectuals and on change, Hoffer had writer's block. To "start the juices flowing again," he kept a diary during 1958-59, published 10 years later, 1969, as Working and Thinking on the Waterfront.

His editor asked him to remove uncomplimentary entries about Blacks--their laziness, hard drinking, noisiness, and prostitution. Hoffer refused. His diary comments on the unfolding drama in the third world and continued his obsession with intellectuals (that is, men of words). "The vigor and health of a society are determined," not by intellectuals, but "by the quality of the common people...."⁶

BETTY: His fourth book, The Ordeal Of Change, 1963, on the philosophy of history, has his most polished essays, is his best book, but may not be read as widely as The True Believer. His ideas include:

--Change comes first, and then evokes revolution; not the other way around.

--Third world countries resent and hate the U.S. because they desperately want to imitate us, but to them imitation means submission.

--The greatest problem facing communist regimes is that people are unwilling to work in a controlled economic system.

--The modern western world discovered and used science effectively because it saw the God it worshipped, Jehovah, as a master craftsman, a machine maker. Early scientists were on a religious quest to find the laws their God had built into His great cosmic machine. Modern science thus had its genesis in imitating God.

-- Distant hope is an opiate, but immediate hope is a stimulant. Upheavals in communist countries occur when hope first rises.

-- Loving oneself in a healthy way is a prerequisite to loving one's fellowman. Thus we treat our neighbors as we treat ourselves.

--All of man's great inventions and great insights came from play, from playful moods. The wheel, for example, was a child's toy before it was used for a chariot and wagon.

--When forced out of corporate society, misfits are capable of becoming pioneers and leaders on the frontiers of human experience.⁷

FRANK: By the time of The Temper of Our Times, 1967, and largely through Selden Osborne and political science professor Norman Jacobson, Hoffer became Senior Research Political Scientist, University of California, Berkeley. He held Wednesday afternoon open seminars during 1964-72, at the height of student protests. Unsympathetic, he often scoffed at "history made by juveniles." Also, in 1965, he gave 16 half-hour interviews on San Francisco's KQED-TV, broadcast nationwide over the National Educational Television Network. They brought much mail, but he was seldom recognized on the street. (We saw some of these broadcasts and became fascinated fans.)

The message of The Temper of Our Times, 1967, is that a free people must reject all would-be saviors who tell them their humanness is wrong. Other themes:

--Forced leisure can cause havoc when a skilled population is condemned to inaction by automation. Automation, Hoffer reflected, might release creative energy to produce a renaissance. Turn the whole society into a school, he said, where everyone learns what he needs to know, at his or her own pace, where learning never ends, and where everyone can reach full potential.

--Black problems arise, not from lack of opportunity but from lack of pride. While there are no easy solutions, the only hope is for Black leaders to return to the ghetto to help lead a cleanup and building campaign that will give Blacks a sense of pride.

--The modern age is the age of the intellectuals, those who are convinced that the masses are incapable of self-rule, that only they and fellow elites know what the masses need. The best defense against elite rule is to raise the intellectual level of everyone so that no elites exist and everyone is an intellectual.

--Those who urge a return to nature are wrong. The battle between man and nature is the central theme of history. Man became human only when he broke away from the iron rule of nature. Manmade cities offer the best refuge against nature. We must not let our cities become uninhabitable.⁸

BETTY: He retired in 1967 after 25 years as a longshoreman (1942-67). He was also interviewed that year on CBS-TV. Hoffer, who had minor literary fame until then, became an instant celebrity. Eric Sevaried visited him in San Francisco in May. At the Fairmont Hotel bar, despite an argument, they understood and appreciated each other. After the meeting, Hoffer, nervous about the interview, called the Osbornes to say that everything would be all right. The next morning, Sevaried wrote, we "ran two cameras on him for two

and a half hours while he talked, sweated, gulped water, and talked.... I flew back to Washington absolutely certain that we had in those cans the greatest film monologue I had ever had anything to do with in all my years in television."

FRANK: Sevareid threatened his New York bosses with mayhem if they shortened the program or ran it in other than prime time. Of the broadcast on September 19, repeated on November 14, Sevareid wrote, "The switchboards at virtually every CBS station carrying the broadcast lit up like a Christmas tree.... Hoffer made millions of confused and troubled Americans feel very much better about their country."⁹

BETTY: In the Sevareid interview, Hoffer praised Lyndon Johnson, then beleaguered with Vietnam. Johnson quoted Hoffer in a speech. Within two weeks of the CBS interview, Hoffer and Johnson were photographed chatting on the White House lawn. A scheduled 5-minute meeting stretched into 55 minutes. Johnson was the second president to admire Hoffer, after Eisenhower, who handed out copies of The True Believer to friends. When Hoffer heard about it, he said, "It proved to me...that this is the kind of book any child can read."¹⁰

His sixth book, First Things, Last Things, 1971, deals with man's creativity, the dangers and potential of leisure, and the significance of cities. Highlights include:

-- "Man's Most Useful Occupation," is playfulness. Man is at his best when he spends time and energy on the superfluous.

--The first walled cities provided refuge for human debris blown away from communal nomadic societies. Countries made up of villages are backward; those composed of cities are progressive.

--The passage of modern youth to adulthood is painful. The problem is that young people no longer have to prove their adulthood. One solution is to put every adolescent to work cleaning up cities.

--Don't give power to intellectuals like Herbert Marcuse. Don't become a permissive society, a chaotic society, which allows young people to teach before they have finished learning.¹¹

FRANK: His seventh book, Reflections on the Human Condition, 1973, is on the origin and nature of man. Highpoints are:

--Beware of the dehumanization of man. Don't let untalented, alienated groups gain political power.

--Help learners become creative people because they alone remain young and continue to grow. Creativity exists in the masses, should be recognized and nurtured because it offsets all the problems posed by troublemakers.¹²

BETTY: In 1978 the Public Broadcasting Service-TV presented "Eric Hoffer: The Crowded Life," with interviews and the actor Richard Basehart reading from his works. In his eighth book, Before the Sabbath, 1979, he credits Jews with creating optimism, fanaticism, and the western mind. He wonders if the nineteenth century was perhaps the West's golden age. Old age, he writes, can give one a capacity for enjoying the beautiful things of the world without wanting to possess them.¹³

FRANK: His last, ninth book was published in 1982, the year before he died: Between the Devil and the Dragon: The Best Essays and Aphorisms of Eric Hoffer.

Back in February 1970, age 67, tired of being in the eye of the storm, he had said he was leaving public life, cutting back on his activities. "No more columns, no more television, no more pictures, no more teaching....I'm going to crawl back into my hole, where I

started....I have become a professional scold, and it is not really me." But he remained active.¹⁴ His own best epitaph is in his own words: "It is the crowded life that is most easily remembered. A life full of turns, achievements, disappointments, surprises, and crises is a life full of landmarks."¹⁵

Reviewers and pundits called him a "literary stevedore" (New Yorker, 1951), a "dockside Montaigne" (Time, 1955), an "epigrammist on the waterfront" (Reporter, 1957), a "secular preacher" (Christian Century, 1963), a "philosopher of the misfits" (Time, 1963), a "docker of philosophy" (Life, 1967), and a "blue-collar Plato" (Newsweek, 1967).

BETTY: My last word on Hoffer: like other self-taught people, he loved learning and a good sentence; he cherished thinkers and books that appealed to him. He despised the communist, fascist, and Nazi intellectuals of the 1930s who wrought havoc. He feared intellectuals with political ambitions because of their compulsion to dominate. His remedy was mass education. Educate everyone so that all are intellectuals and no ruling elites can emerge. Mass schooling would also release the great talents Hoffer was convinced existed in common working people. Another way to release talents would be to encourage playfulness. Hoffer was convinced that the playful mood brought with it creativity.

FRANK: My last thought is fascination with Hoffer's theme that human beings are unfinished creatures who must finish themselves, humanize themselves. Nature attains perfection, but man never does. There is a perfect ant, a perfect bee, but man is perpetually unfinished. His unfinishedness sets him apart. Unlike animals, he has fewer specialized organs, is born without a built-in tool kit. He quotes Thomas Hardy: "Man begins when nature ends. Man and nature can never be friends." A return to nature is a return to brute force. The ascent of man was an effort to get out from under the iron rule of nature. Only then did man humanize himself, finish himself with technology. In doing so, he becomes a creator, a half god. To be

human is to be free, to create. Hoffer says in Ordeal of Change: "Man's only legitimate end in life is to finish God's work, to bring to full growth the capacities and talents in all of us." It's a good thought to end on.

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